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Doing Research on The History of The Body: Representation and Experience

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The history of the body has become a hot topic recently. My own work has certainly benefited from the trend, which has given me ways to think about medicine and gender in Chinese history. It has given me readers as well. Yet fifteen years ago when I first started working on medicine and women in traditional China, the idea that the human body has a history was considered more than novel: it was strange, even outrageous. My 1987 article on 18th century childbirth was shaped more by the themes and approaches of social

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1 This is a revised version of a talk originally given to the Gender Studies Group (婦女與性別史研究群), Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, on November 23, 1999. I am grateful to the participants in that seminar for their extremely helpful comments and criticisms. A Chinese translation of the original talk appeared in *Xin shi xue* (新史學), 10: 4 (December 1999).

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history,[2] and when I took up the subject of menstruation and the cultural construction of female blood, it was as a closet anthropologist –where the actual body in question was relatively a-historical. One moment I was talking about the women of the Tang dynasty that Sun Simiao wrote about, (I quoted him extensively).[3] Another I was discussing the women of Taichung here in Taiwan whom I interviewed with Chen Shuyueh in 1985.[4] I feel I have been witness to a gradual normalization of the idea of body history that has taken place since the mid 1980s. As a practitioner I have had plenty of time to think about and try to fulfil its promise. I've also discovered some of its problems and pitfalls. Today I want to talk first about the history of this normalization process and then about the problems that I think we body historians eventually encounter in our work.

I am going to talk about two broad approaches to doing research on the history of the body: I call them the history of representation and the history of perception or experience. My talk will move from history of representation to history of perception/experience, and end with some philosophical reflections.

In the 1970s the body began to enter history through studies of representations—historians, modeling their methods on those of the anthropologists, took up the body as a sign or symbol. An important early anthropological work on the topic was Mary Douglas's book, *Natural Symbols* (New York 1982). One of the first historical works to excite me personally was

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2 Charlotte Furth, "Concepts of Pregnancy, Childbirth and Infancy in Qing Dynasty China," *Journal of Asian Studies* 45:1 (1987), pp. 7-35.

3 Charlotte Furth, "Blood, Body and Gender: Medical Images of the Female Condition in China," *Chinese Science* 7 (1986), pp. 43-66.

4 Charlotte Furth and Chen Shu-yueh, "Chinese Medicine and the Anthropology of Menstruation in Contemporary Taiwan," *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, n.s., 6:1 (1992), pp. 27-48.

Carolyn Bynum's *Jesus the Mother*[5] which dealt with the body in Catholic iconography of the high middle ages. Bynum asked why it was that during the late 12th to 13th centuries, Christians liked to appeal to the image of Christ as a nursing mother. This image was used pictorially but even more in the writings of monks and priests who depicted the faithful as nurtured by milk from Christ's breasts. Bynum argued that this was a question that opened up the history of the evolution of the Catholic priesthood: theologians turned from a masculine image of Christ as king to a feminine one of Christ as nurse when it became important to them to portray the humanitarian mission of the Catholic Church. Bynum's work showed beautifully how gender was used symbolically in ways that reinforced rather than challenged traditional notions of femininity. At the same time her history did challenge 20th century readers' stereotypes about the kinds of bodies deemed acceptable as representations of masculine gender. Another book, by Leo Steinberg, pointed out that the humanity of Christ was represented in the conventions of Renaissance Madonna and child paintings that visually focussed on the Christ child's genitals.[6]

As representation, the body began to be invoked to talk about many histories, particularly the history of gender ideology. Film and advertising, dress and fashion, construct images of desirability in women; the male business suit emerges in the early 19th century along with the industrial bourgeois economic order; Coco Chanel's modernist clothing designs constructing flat planes of fabric and waistless loose fitting dresses came to represent the freedom of the new women of the post world war one era after 1919. The

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5 Carolyn Bynum, *Jesus the Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

6 Leon Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983).

history of 19th and 20th century sports, as studied by Yu Chien-ming, is closely connected to the history of modern nationalism. Medical historians considering, the sanitation movement of the late l9th and early 20th century, enlist the body and the germ theory of disease to talk about modernization. Colonial race relations are expressed through images of hyper-masculine African males as rapists or super-feminine Asian females as seductive Butterflies. We see the power of the human body to work symbolically on many levels. In these histories bodies become signs, illuminating otherwise effaced and invisible dimensions of the history of religion, politics, gender.

Body history received a strong impetus from the cultural turn in the human sciences after the crisis of Marxism of the late 1960s, and Foucault certainly was a major innovator here with his interpretation of medicine, psychiatry, criminal law as regimes of power working through disciplining the body. But feminism played an important independent role in pushing the development of this kind of history. The feminist agenda in the 1970s and 1980s was driven by the need to understand and expose the hidden sources of gender ideology in practices and representations of daily life that we take for granted. It was because as late 20th century moderns we feminists conventionally believed that what makes us different as women is rooted in the body. Discussion of gender difference tended to take as its starting point biological sex. The feminist goal was to unlearn this lesson, and to overturn the idea the social differences between males and females have their source and justification in preexisting natural biological differences. Anthropologists like Sherry Ortner and Michelle Rosaldo led the way with ethnographies of rural and village societies that pointed to the variability of gender systems outside of the North Atlantic world, themes soon picked up by specialists on East Asia.[7]

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7 Sherry B. Ortner and Harriet Whitehead, eds., *Sexual Meanings: the Cultural*

The feminist deployment of body history makes it especially clear that analysis of the body will connect representations and images with subjectivity, ie the body as a vehicle shaping perception and experience. Even from these sketchy examples we can see that not only biological science but dress, fashion, health, sports, ritual, space and architecture, art, religion and much else do not just create stereotypes and images of bodily appearance and performance. We imagine them as more powerful than that. The assumption that such representations create human "subjects" is one of the basic claims of cultural studies, and this immediately links a material body of flesh and organs with much more protean and complex categories of "self" and "identity".

Some works of body history, like Dorothy Ko's essays on footbinding, do assume that it is impossible to get beyond the image or representations to any authentic account of bodily self hood as perceived by historical actors. Ko says that we will never be able to imagine what Ming women thought about their lotus feet—or how they felt or experienced embodiment through a practice so shrouded in silence as to leave no trace in the historical record. What can be recovered is only the meanings represented by the history of footbinding's decline in the 19th and 20th centuries, when all of a sudden people could not stop talking about it. But other work, my own as well, argues that past body experience can be at least partially recovered. It can be shown that human beings have experienced living in, with, or through their bodies differently in different times and places. This then is what is claimed by the idea that beyond issues of representation, the body has a history.

Here we are talking about the history of the body not as a history of ideologies or of representations but as a history of perception or experience.[8]

Construction of Gender and Sexuality (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

8 Perception and experience, used almost interchangeably here, will be distinguished in

The scholar who did the most to open such an approach to me was Barbara Duden, author of *The Woman Beneath the Skin: a Doctor's Patients in Eighteenth-century Germany.*[9] She makes clear that what made this idea outrageous to many is that it comes as a challenge to scientific accounts of the human body which since the 18th century, have been so powerful as to be assumed to be natural. Duden points out that we today all inhabit a biological body, which we believe to be validated by science. We learn about it from the discourse of health, from schoolroom lessons, from pictures and charts depicting cells, anatomical organs, bones, vascular system and muscles—we relate our bodily feelings to the action of nerves and hormones, our health and nutrition to intake of calories, vitamins and minerals. If such a body has a history, it is Darwinian, ie the natural history of our evolution as a species. And perhaps also it has a modern history of population and disease—epidemiology and demography. Finally history of the modern embrace of this body is a history of discovery of its truth, one of the triumphs of scientific progress.

Duden's task as a historian of the body is to make readers imagine how people might have lived in pre-Enlightenment, pre-biological bodies. And in the course of doing this, she wanted her readers to come to understand the social factors behind the creation of the modern body–factors that the triumphant belief system of modern science has obscured. She argued that the modern

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theoretical discourse. Perception is closer to the sphere of sensation and to cognitive philosophy; while the term "experience" appeals to a more global subjective consciousness for which claims of authenticity are likely to be made. Duden's work uses the category of "experience" and Kuriyama's, discussed below, stresses "perception".

9 Barbara Duden, *The Woman Beneath the Skin: A Doctor's Patients in Eighteenth-century Germany* (German edition 1987; Cambridge, Mass.: English edition Harvard University Press, 1991).

biological body is imagined in the singular and through the possessive. We "have" a body and we "have" it before we have relationships. It is the part of us that is associated with nature—pre-social, before culture. It is also a vehicle for the expression of an individualistic sense of selfhood. This body splits material and spiritual selves, and male from female gender. You have guessed it: it is a "bourgeois" body. Duden actually offers up some pretty sweeping dualisms here. Where moderns think of birth and death as factual data of social science, expressed as fertility and mortality, the old fashioned pre-Enlightenment women she wrote about understood them as passages between worlds; where moderns think of health as natural condition and a right, to be guaranteed by society, her subjects--country women in a mid-eighteenth century German township-- accepted suffering as inevitable; where moderns see their bodies as autonomous and well bounded, her subjects' bodies were open to the world, its winds and airs; where moderns see the body as belonging to a individual, who legally equal to all others in society, they saw themselves as participating in a great chain of being integrating humans in a cosmological hierarchy.

Much of the European historical work that contributes to body history has been about this same sort of great divide of the Enlightenment---I am thinking of Michel Foucault, of Alain Corbin,[10] of Roy Porter,[11] Thomas Laqueur[12] and many others less well known. Whatever you think about the particulars of these rather sweeping generalizations about modernity, they make clear that one is in fact never talking about the body in isolation, since the human body is

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10 Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odors and the French Social Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986).

11 See, inter alia, Roy Porter, "History of the Body" in Peter Burke, ed., *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).

12 Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

always with us and is always enmeshed in social life. But Duden's work is important because more than many others it lays out important methodological assumptions about how we understand and gain historical knowledge of such a body as experience.

What is a body anyway? And in particular, how can a human body be an object of human knowledge? Once you move to body history as a history of perception or subjective experience you are led from history to philosophy. Why? It is because human knowledge of the self and of others here is enmeshed in complex questions of epistemology. In European tradition, the question gets entangled in what philosophers call the "mind body problem." Modern scientific thought, in constructing the natural body of biology, must imagine human minds as disembodied, as pure intellect. The classical picture comes from Descartes: we have a body that is material and a mind that is a pure thinking "I" capable of observing and analyzing. Descartes famous aphorism is " I think, therefore I am" and modern philosophers often gloss this saying he believed in a "ghost in the machine." This is to live in a body that observes its own bodily materiality as an object. This is the famous Cartesian dualism. But can one's body be simply an object of one's own purely mental reflection as if from outside? Or is it inside? Isn't consciousness in some more fundamental way embodied? I think the vast majority of neo-Confucianists might say yes. I am not sure what Buddhists would say. In Europe and America, many pro science anti -Cartesian philosophers try functionalist approaches. They say that what we call mental activity is a function, of the brain, of chemistry. Here mind becomes something like a neurological computer. For philosophical materialists, this is one kind of answer to the mind body problem.

In rejecting both these views Duden makes clear that alternatives must involve one in alternative accounts of perception itself. Her solution is to argue

that the imagination itself is a source of material reality, that perceptions are what is real (p 6-7), and to draw upon the tradition of European philosophical psychology called phenomenology. Simply put, phenomenology is based on the assumption that it is impossible to segregate an objective reality out there from the process that constructs our perceptions of it. Her method was to look for traces of an experential reality of the body in the old humoral language of symptoms and sensations which her 18th century doctor recorded on the basis of his patient interviews. Such a language, she argued, came from patient understandings and not from learned medical discourse. Such language was capable of constituting intimate bodily experience, allowing us to imagine the historically specific body as lived by the women of Eisenach, a provincial town in 18th century Germany.

So we arrive here at the conclusion that if the history of the body is a history of experience, or perception, it will be retrieved through some very complex understandings of the epistemology of the body and its relationship to the texts that are the traces of its past life. I got to know Duden in the mid 1980s and my conversations with her then had a strong influence on my own book, *A Flourishing Yin*, which came out more than a decade later. Another book has just come out that takes a similar path. This is Shigehisa Kuriyama's *The Expressiveness of the Body and the Divergence of Greek and Chinese Medicine* (Zone 1999). Needless to say, I am a great admirer of Kuriyama's book. Let me say a little about similarities and differences between our two books. It will show further how writing a history of body experience or perception forces one to struggle with underlying philosophical problems of the nature of the body and of knowledge.

In writing our accounts of historically specific forms of body experience or perception, we both struggled with the fact that the knowledge of the body

that we claim to have as historians is revealed to be dependent upon language. In my own case, I came to think the role of language was crucial, and my point of departure was my understanding of Duden. I decided I could not really know whether phenomenology solves the mind body problem and constructs the nature of the real in an interactive process of perception both shaping and shaped by its objects. But all of us understand our bodies through the mediation of culture, communicated through language. We can argue that we learn our modern bodies from books: charts of anatomy, descriptions of reproductive, digestive, endocrine and other functions, the whole repertory of biological knowledge. I decided that social knowledge—that other bodies and mine are alike—depends upon signs, pictures, words and such essentially symbolic practices. They are essential to what we accept as common experience. I had to try and convey how actiors might have experienced the historical body of Song and Ming dynasty medicine through its culturally specific linguistic categories, circulating vitalities like Blood (xue) and qi, dynamic qualities like yin and yang, somatic states like depletion(xu) and repletion (shi), cold (han) and hot (re)etc. My theoretical assumption is that as experience these must be understood as "real" and perhaps richer than the relatively impoverished biomedical resources for evoking bodily function through a language of anatomy, neurology and biochemistry.

This was my solution to the necessity of an epistemological strategy of interpretation if you are to do body history. Kuriyama's, book, in taking a similar path, focussed somewhat more narrowly and I think all the more effectively upon a comparative analysis of particular styles of perception specific to medical diagnosis. His topic is ancient Greek and ancient Chinese medicine, and his question is, "what is a pulse?" "what is a muscle?" I will stick to the pulse here, since it is good enough to make the general point. Kuriyama also says that perception is not a matter of raw experience but is evoked

through words. Both European and Chinese doctors—Galen and Wang Shuhe—filled pages and pages with attempts to describe the human pulse, and both they and their followers ended up saying that the pulse is in fact impossible to describe. In the end, language could offer only a more or less crude approximation. In the end, when Europeans felt a drum-like rhythm marked by beats like musical notation and Chinese felt a rhythm about qualities of flow like floating, tense, chord-like, rough, fine, etc—they were not feeling through words exactly, even though we have to use words to talk about it. The term "expressive ness of the body" tries to capture a particular relationship between words and feelings. Expressiveness, Kuriyama says, is added to speech by tone of voice-- whether our words are loud or soft, gentle, laughing or somber, calm or agitated. Cultural styles of feeling give a tone to body experience.

I relate my language of the body to social meanings; he relates the language of the body to an intimate linguistically-shaped but ultimately non linguistic quality—cultural styles of perception through touch. In the last pages of our books we have different reflections. I talk about translation –the need for a theory of translatability of languages if we are to recognize in our bodies a common humanity. He talks about a final mystery, the presence of life tangible to the senses but ultimately elusive. I say we have to look for better words; he rejects words. You could say I sound like Wittgenstein; he sounds like Zhuangzi.

What has happened to body history here?

Are we talking just about bodies at this point? Or just about history? Obviously the answer is both yes and no---through the body we have been drawn into the broadest streams of reflection on the human condition. One thing we both also are doing in our different ways is taking a step back from the

relativism that is one of the risks of body history, as it is of all forms of cultural studies which emphasize the power of language, texts or representations to create alternative realities. Theories that other cultures produce other bodies can lead down some dangerous paths. One of the most socially powerful of these dangerous paths leads to modern racism. Another of course is the idea that male and female are essentially unlike because of bodily differences. So both of us are trying to establish the limits of relativism and to relate our historical analyses of culturally specific Asian modes of perception to some sort of universals that might emerge through some further consideration of the relationship of language, bodies and the world.

To sum up, when we do body history, we risk finding that the object of our analysis becomes more shifting and elusive the further we go. The body's obvious solidity and materiality seems to dissolve as we are drawn into a terrain haunted by ghosts of very longstanding philosophical debates in European thought about the relationship of body and mind, the nature of the self, the epistemology of knowledge. Indeed the attraction of body history for many has been shaped by residual theoretical allegiances to longstanding versions of philosophical materialism or idealism. On the one hand you have a cluster of interpreters who are asking essentially religious questions. Barbara Duden in fact writes as a radical Christian, for whom the history of the body has been a way of talking about experiential understandings of human suffering and mortality that Enlightenment secularism dismisses. Carolyn Bynum in recent work sees medieval accounts of the body as preoccupied with "the body that dies" --raising questions about old and new ways of addressing human anxieties about the boundaries of selfhood and personal identity.[13] Other scholars, like

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[13] Carolyn Bynum, "Why All the Fuss About the Body? A Medievalist's Perspective," in Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, eds., *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in*

Francesca Bray, use the body to place human beings in the matrix of material life and everyday practices that are seen as more immediate and perhaps more powerful than the frothy products of ideation. Such theoretical orientations come out of a socialism that has been tempered by the failures of Marxism since the 1970s, which has found alternatives in a sociology of practice. Bray's subject is the body and technology.[14] She sees farm fields, medicine, tools, labor and domestic space as features of material culture. These shape social and cultural experience not by words but by ways of doing. They are not languages but embodied practices. Learning to live in a house, to plant rice or to weave cloth will not come from words but from some sort of bodily discipline like learning to dance, and the culturally specific experiences involved will be conveyed through action. In sum, though our philosophical and epistemological strategies differ, for all of us, Dudan, Kuriyama, Bray and myself, making the body's experience the center of inquiry is to look for a satisfactory alternative to the traditional European mind-body dualism. And in so doing the nature of the "body" in question becomes problematized.

Where does this leave the history of the body as history of representation? As some of you after listening to me pointed out in the discussion, just as mind and body cannot be segregated into tidy separate compartments, so experience or perception, once named and put into words, can be seen as a form of representation (language is a system of signs); while representations, if they create subjectivity, must in fact be assumed to shape perceptions and experience (language is an expressive idiom). Most actual works on the history of the body will in fact be hybrid in nature—my own work is certainly a case in

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the Study of Society and Culture (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

[14] Francesca Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

point. However, I do think that there is a palpable tension between two styles of analysis here. Those emphasizing representational interpretations will suggest a distance between the psyche of the human subject and the external semiotic systems of his or her environment—a distance that hints of ideology and power relations, and makes experience a matter of "internalizing" imposed structures. Such scholars will sound more Foucauldian; their rhetoric hints of suspicion. Those emphasizing experential interpretations will try to use language to project an imaginative picture of an inner subjective world; they will sound more "literary"; their rhetoric aims for empathy. The two orientations remain distinct. Moreover, the second approach is the one that stakes the strongest claim to show that the body, in and of itself, has its own history.

What are the lessons all of this has to teach those of us want to explore the history of the body?

One is that these philosophical issues are important for us to understand. We need to know how they work in our research. But they work for me, and I suspect for others as well, as tactics of intervention. They unlock interpretation –ways of exploring our sources and thinking about what they might mean. Nonetheless, though we have to engage with these problems, and we may have strong views about them, we are not in a position ultimately to resolve them. We are stimulated by them but our work in the end produces local knowledge, not philosophy. If we ignore them, we risk a kind of intellectual blindness. If we let them take over, we will be carried far away from the local knowledge that is our metier.

The other lesson, I think, is that individual pieces of "body history" must be recognized as needing grounding in specific topical and disciplinary domains---in the history of gender, of politics, labor, technology, art, medicine, science or religion, to mention only a few of the possibilities as protean as

human experience itself. Simply to study the "body" narrowly conceived risks reproducing in scholarship the act of isolating the body that this project of body history started out by criticizing. It is ironical that body history as a feminist project is developed out of a desire to unmask biological representations of male and female that have made the body, standing alone, appear to us moderns as the final source of knowledge about gender identity. Feminists have succeeded brilliantly in showing how the body is enmeshed in culture, including the culture and ideology of modern science. But the scholarly emphasis upon seeing everything through the body sends its own kind of reductionistic message.

The body fascinates, but this suggests we need to think carefully about why. I think it is important to understand that the fascination that has inspired our work is also the product of a very characteristic late twentieth century modernist sensibility. Our focus on the body is fostered by contemporary science and medicine, true, but also by the capitalist cultures of mass consumption, and by our special end-of-century obsessions with sexuality and with youth. The students of body history can be in danger of bringing this baggage into their work without always knowing it. So I think that those of us who do body history have to think very carefully first about connections: not only the philosophical connections between body and consciousness, practices and languages; but also about the social connections that locate bodies grounded in living human beings' lives; and about the enchantments of desire that the modern body is enmeshed in.